# NO TITLE HERE

## photographs by jeff mermelstein

## introduction by marvin heiferman

**"...[O]ne of the great snapshot artists of all time, right up there with Garry Winogrand, Elliott Erwitt, Burke Uzzle, and Lee Friedlander."** –Glenn O'Brien, *Artforum*

Jeff Mermelstein began photographing in Asbury Park, New Jersey, in 1981 on a quest for taffy-rich colors and seedy atmospheres. Mermelstein was mesmerized by the sights: a pink lady at a baby parade, a startled bag lady dressed in red, a cat-show judge named Mr. Friend. Trips to Asbury Park and beyond soon grew to encompass a much broader spectrum of American life–from commercial sets, trade shows, and wedding parties to dog shows, mall grand openings, cocktail parties, and nearly anything jarring, disjointed, or surreal in daily life he encountered in-between.

Magazine assignments led Mermelstein to explore, among other far-out subject matter, the curious sights of animal acting, including legendary four-pawed performers Morris the Cat, Lassie, Benji, the Merrill Lynch bull, the Exxon tiger, and Zippy, a performing chimp. "I still feel the excitement of hugging Zippy," Mermelstein recalls, "and watching and photographing him in his bus and as he entertained at a bar mitzvah on Long Island."

Inspired by these encounters with the odd and unusual, Mermelstein continues to this day to snap up scenes of vivid color, glitz, and plastic artifice. No Title Here showcases his treasures from over twenty years of canvassing the land in search of the quirky, the absurd, the oddly lyrical, and the sympathetically funny sights it has to offer.

**"I find it particularly exciting when a picture evokes anything near that word, 'mystery'."** –Jeff Mermelstein

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# NO DECISIVE MOMENTS marvin heiferman

Half a century ago, the Holy Grail for many photographers entailed prowling up and down Fifth Avenue, or back and forth across the continent in search of situations that might yield a "decisive moment." The term was first associated with the work of the French photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson. It described a fraction-of-a-second photographic encounter, the moment when coincidence and craft collide to create a once-in-a-lifetime image of transcendent beauty and unique power.

The challenge of capturing their own "decisive moments" propelled two subsequent generations of photographers to scour the American landscape for opportunities to make astonishing, iconic images that would reveal what the distractions of everyday life kept hidden from us. Photographers such as Garry Winogrand, Lee Friedlander, William Klein, and Diane Arbus thrived on the chance that extraordinary pictures could be extracted from happenstance and the jumble of odd juxtapositions and weird behaviors. They flirted with and reveled in the visual anarchy that reflected the values and restlessness of American democracy, psychology, and consumer culture. They drew their energy from, and built their subject matter on, the depiction of mostly ordinary Americans bouncing off of each other, self-absorbed in their pursuit of pleasure, self-expression, freedoms, and a livelihood. And so did the legion of photographic heirs that followed.

But by the late 1970s, the promise of the street and the land had given way to even more expansive cultural possibilities. Increasingly, hyperactive Americans were being driven by, not just recorded in, the spectacular visuals produced by the rapidly expanding mass media. One casualty of this change was the waning impact of what had become known as "street photography." Sidewalks became less crowded with photogenic characters and visual incident as the economies of cities faltered and the exodus to the suburbs continued. The rise of color photography made black-and-white images look extinct. The public's bombardment with, and growing sophistication about, powerful imagery in the media signaled a seismic shift in the way Americans looked at photography, their culture, and themselves. Photography

became as much a reflection of our self-consciousness as it was a document of the world we moved through.

The more America's vigorous and fickle consumer culture depended on a rapid succession of provocative and sensationalized images to seize the public's attention, the less apt we would be to plumb the subtleties of *any* single still image. This shift—from the value once placed on a close reading of images to a premium placed on visuals capable of grabbing attention and triggering non-verbal responses—presents enormous challenges to ambitious photographers, especially those committed to making photographs that shed light on the human condition. It's not an easy task, and it's precisely what makes Jeff Mermelstein's photographs so interesting to look at.

Like his predecessors, Mermelstein gravitates to places where people congregate—no longer on the street, but in malls, convenience stores, stadiums, and at trade shows and special events. If street photographs frequently depicted a world in which the "haves" and "have-nots" shared the same urban stage, Mermelstein's work appears to be driven by another dichotomy: America was divisible into two categories, performers and audience members. And in this performative universe, regardless of which role they choose to play, Mermelstein's subjects share a curious mixture of expectation and disengagement.

Mermelstein is known for his humanism and his offbeat sense of humor. And there are plenty of both in these pictures. There is, for example, a stately, silly, yet slightly sinister image of a turtle that's been left to balance atop a styrofoam cup. There's no shortage of amusing photographs: images of bad hairdos and toupees, awkward celebrity encounters, and wrinkled, overdressed socialites looking doomed in their pathetically insular world. There's a picture of Zippy the Chimp (who entertains humans at bar mitzvahs and birthday parties) laughing and leafing through a girlie magazine in a moment of relaxation. There's even a photograph of a woman down on all fours, blowing air up an armadillo's ass, urging it toward the finish line in a race.

Still, it seems that for Mermelstein something more serious is always at stake. In almost every photograph, someone is waiting—waiting for the laundry to be done, the parade to come, a drink to be served, a seat in a restaurant. People wait for enlightenment or for change at the cash register. They wait for service. They wait to get out of jail. They wait to be noticed. But what actually drives the pictures is not the electric charge of anticipation, but a shared and profound sense of resignation. Out of boredom as much as excitement, people look out through doorways and windows, up at the sky and out the sides of the frame. One salesman looks into the enameled void of a washing machine as he tries to sell a woman the appliance. Another kind of salesman, a bug-eyed "spiritual doctor practitioner," stares into space as he offers up a different kind of cleansing to a consumer in need.

Ultimately, Mermelstein's photographs are empowered by the poignant combination of empathy and a subtle yet resolute sense of determination. He doesn't point fingers. Rather, he reminds us of our shared vulnerabilities. These photographs are peppered with signs of our need for reassurance. Spirituality is a constant theme—fingers are crossed, eyes close in meditation, American flags fly. Mermelstein knows, and the pictures never stop asserting, what consumer culture works so hard to make us forget: we're all in this life together.

—New York City, 2003

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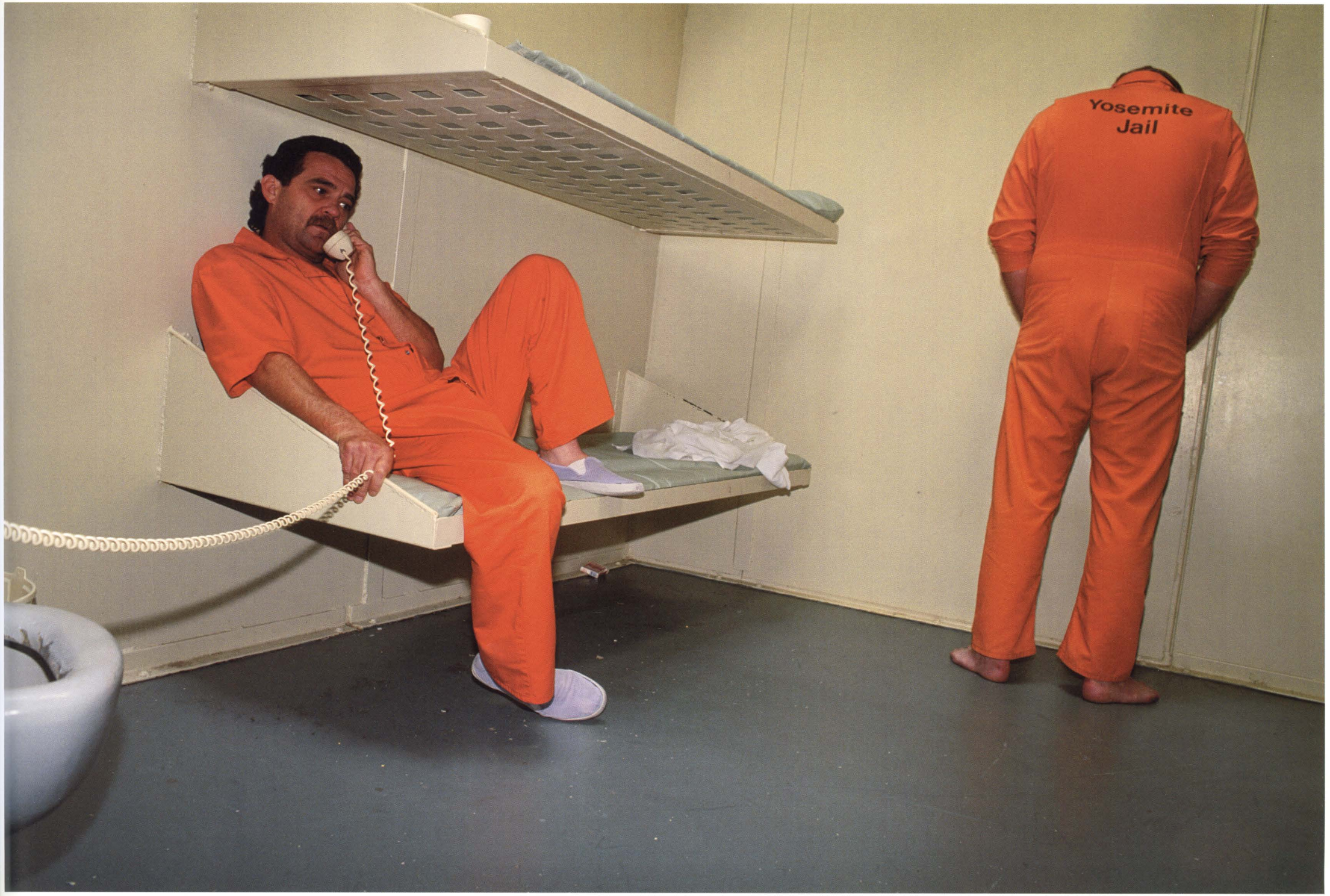
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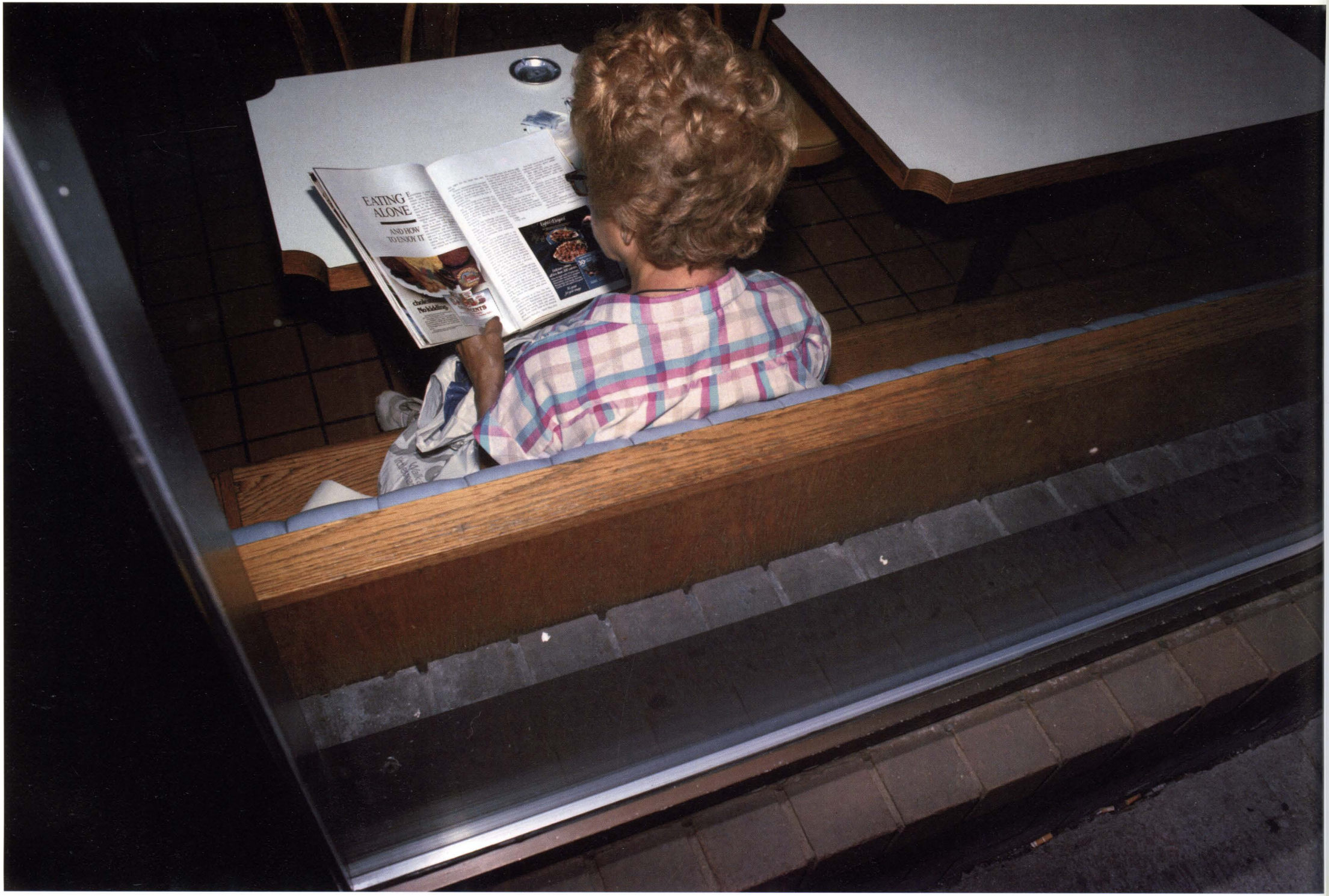
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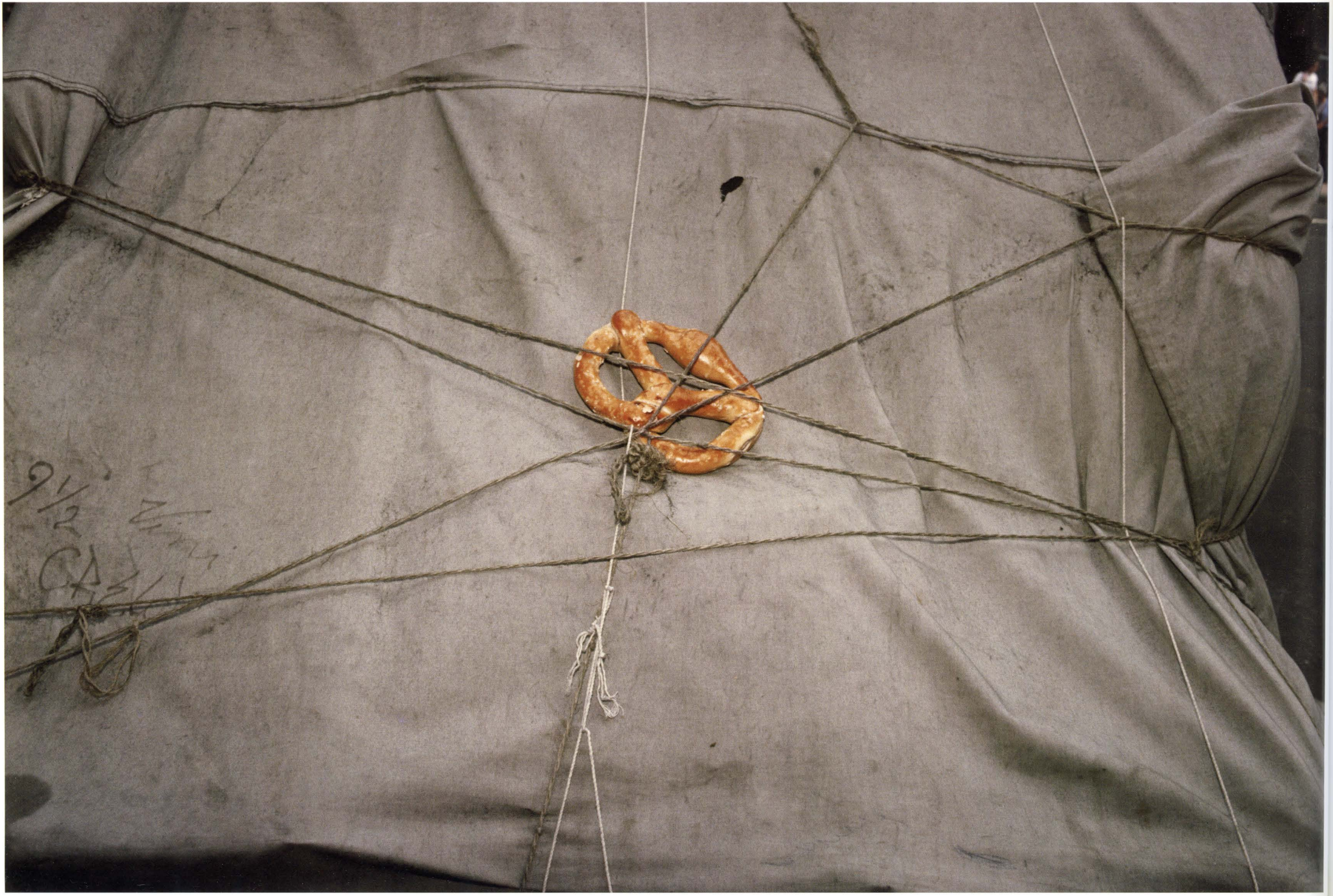

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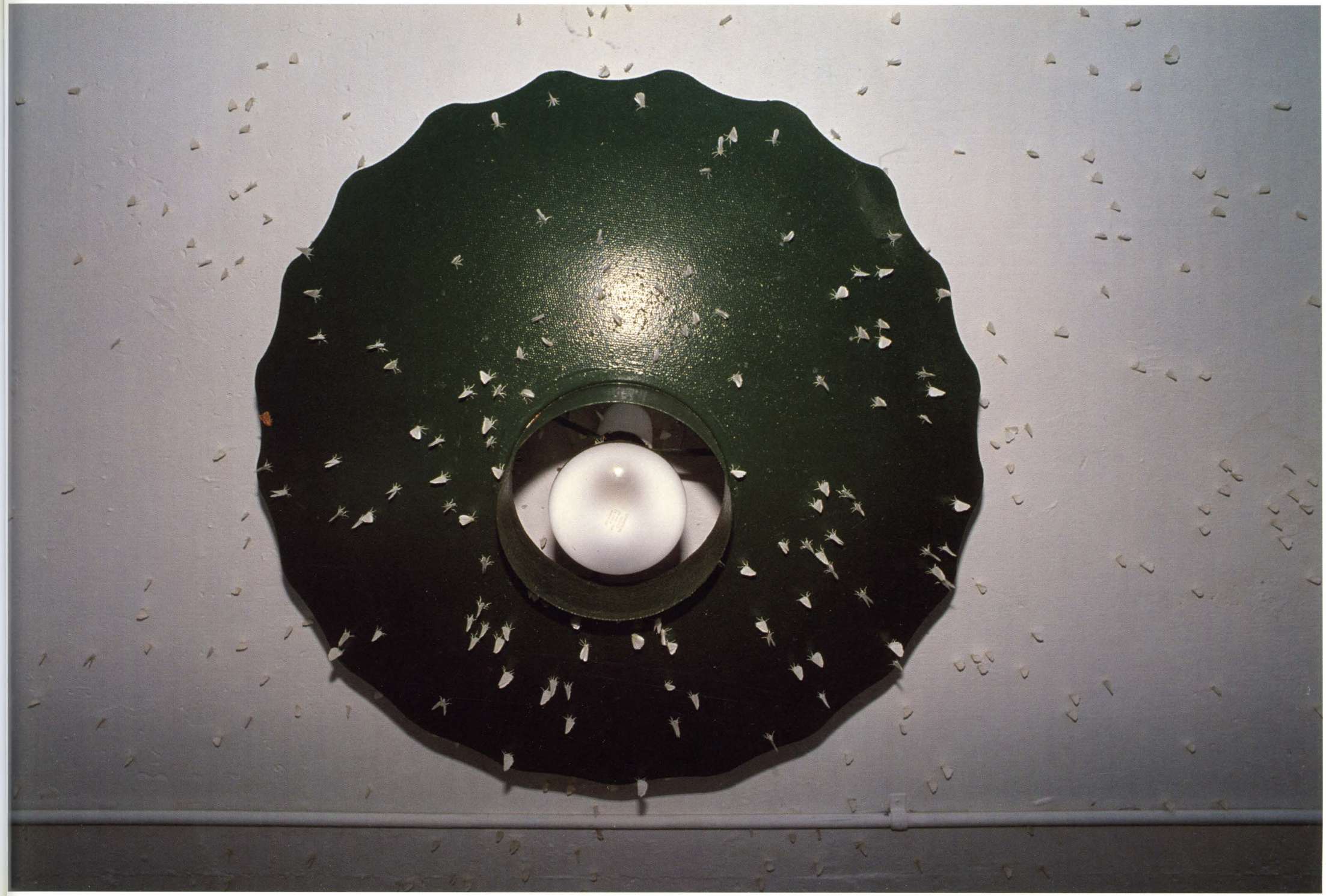

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**JEFF MERMELSTEIN** was born in New Brunswick, New Jersey, in 1957. His work is in the collections of The Art Institute of Chicago; the International Center of Photography and The Jewish Museum in New York City; the International Museum of Photography at George Eastman House, Rochester, New York; the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston; and the Museum Ludwig in Cologne, Germany, among others. Mermelstein's photographs have also appeared in a number of publications, including ***Aperture***, ***Artforum***, ***Details***, ***DoubleTake***, ***Life***, ***The New Yorker***, and ***The New York Times Magazine***. The recipient of numerous awards, Mermelstein has received the prestigious Aaron Siskind Foundation's Individual Photographer's Fellowship; his book SIDEWALK was published by Dewi Lewis in 2000. A member of the faculty at the International Center of Photography and the School of Visual Arts graduate photography program, Mermelstein lives and works in New York City.

**MARVIN HEIFERMAN** writes about visual and popular culture and has curated photography exhibitions for The Museum of Modern Art, The Whitney Museum of American Art, and the International Center of Photography.

**POWERHOUSE BOOKS** publishes books about visual and popular culture and has not-yet-published photography exhibition catalogues for The Museum of Modern Art, The Whitney Museum of American Art, and the International Center of Photography; it hopes to hook up with Marvin Heiferman some day. But it has published many art photography books that are nonetheless noteworthy: LAPDANCER by Juliana Beasley; MIDNIGHT by Arlene Gottfried; HERE AND THERE by Helen Levitt; PICTURES I HAD TO TAKE by Joel Grey; THE LAST SUNDAY IN JUNE by Jamel Shabazz; BODY PARTS by John Coplans; THERE IS NO EYE by John Cohen; CLOWN PAINTINGS by Diane Keaton; THE IMAGINARY PORTRAITS OF GEORGE CONDO; PRINCE EAGLE by Elizabeth Peyton; HOT AND COLD by Richard Hell; WE'RE DESPERATE by Jim Jocoy; DREAMLAND by Jeff Burton; THE BABIES by Polly Borland; TRANSITIONS AND EXITS by Ari Marcopoulos; TIME FRAMES by Michael Spano; and SIBUSISO MBHELE AND HIS FISH HELICOPTER by Koto Bolofo.

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